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ABSTRACT

During the 2002-2003 academic year, six roundtables were held to explore uses of the data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for improvement of student learning. This paper describes the roundtable discussion held in October 2002 at the Professional Organizational Development conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Thirteen faculty developers from across the country and nearly every higher education sector discussed institutional uses of data from the NSSE. The discussion focused on the ways in which faculty developers have used this new source of data available to campuses. Specific topics examined were impacts of use, availability of data, uses of data in faculty development activities, and ways in which NSSE data can be interpreted for faculty members. The roundtable focused on the: (1) need for inclusion of faculty developers in overall campus planning efforts; (2) data as the impetus for conversations about learning, diagnosing problems, priority setting, and resource allocation; (3) creation of a campus culture of change through using the data in faculty and teaching assistant orientation and in supporting services of Centers of Teaching and Learning; and (4) challenges of and suggestions for interpreting data for faculty. (Author/SLD)

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Faculty Developers Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to be Change Agents

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DEEP
Documenting Effective Educational Practices

NATIONAL ROUNDTABLE SERIES

FACULTY DEVELOPERS USING THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (NSSE) TO BE CHANGE AGENTS

BY ADRIANNA KEZAR

During the 2002-03 academic year, AAHE and NSSE are conducting six roundtables to explore uses of NSSE data for improvement of student learning. A roundtable held in October 2002 at the Professional Organizational Development (POD) conference in Atlanta gave 13 faculty developers from institutions across the U. S. and nearly every higher education sector the chance to discuss institutional uses of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The discussion focused particularly on the ways in which faculty developers have used this new source of data available to campuses. Specific questions examined impacts of use, availability of data to faculty development offices, uses of the data in faculty development activities, and ways in which NSSE data can be interpreted for faculty members.

The POD roundtable focused on the:

- need for inclusion of faculty developers in overall campus planning efforts;
- data as impetus for conversations about learning, diagnosing problems, priority setting and resource allocation;
- creation of a campus culture of change through using data in faculty and teaching assistant orientation and in supporting both continuing and new services of Centers of Teaching and Learning; and
- challenges of and suggestions for interpreting data for faculty.

A summary of the roundtable discussion follows.

Uses and Impacts of NSSE Data Institution-Wide: How Can Faculty Developers Use the Data to Create a New Culture and Vocabulary?

Before examining the specific uses of NSSE data by faculty developers, the roundtable explored institution-wide efforts. The first clear theme to emerge is that campuses are using the NSSE data for myriad purposes. For the accreditation process and for statewide or institution- wide assessment efforts, NSSE is helping to meet the mandate for proof about student learning, an area where states across the country were unable to provide adequate data for state report cards on higher education in 2000 and 2002. Other uses of NSSE data for institutional improvements included providing data on retention or the first year experience to strengthen programmatic and pedagogical development. In other cases committees or task forces were formed to develop new initiatives in response to NSSE results. In a few instances NSSE data were used in strategic planning efforts—providing information to support specific activities, decision-making efforts around new initiatives, and prioritizing issues. Results of NSSE are sent to the president of the institution and a media contact so that the institution decides how the results are disseminated. From the point of view of faculty developers, more campuses may want to consider how they could coordinate the use of NSSE data to create a stronger, coordinated impact.

Faculty developers can have a key role in promoting institution-wide use of NSSE data in terms of what one participant called "creating a new institutional culture around teaching and learning." NSSE data can be used

for faculty and staff development. Some participants described the important work of "starting conversations." Town meetings, retreats, and ongoing events such as orientation or welcome back ceremonies are all places where NSSE results can be used to get people on campus talking about the teaching and learning environment in a new language. According to one participant, "Perhaps the most important activity that we can initiate is conversation about faculty student interaction or academic challenge." General conversations led to specific initiatives and efforts that were supported by NSSE data. "Our campus set up a committee to examine the first year experience based on conversations we had about NSSE results," said another participant.

Some described conversations as leading to "diagnoses of problems" of which campus administrators might have been aware, but previously had had no data to support the re-allocation of funds to address. Armed with NSSE data, the campus can make this issue a priority. Faculty developers mentioned that one area of teaching and learning that could be better understood from the NSSE data is collaboration between academic and student affairs. For example, on a few campuses, conversations and joint activities between these two groups have been facilitated through the NSSE data. Institution-wide efforts to make sense of the NSSE data provided the needed "call to action" that helped to complement the long-standing efforts by Centers for Teaching Excellence to improve the environment for teaching and learning.

Faculty Developers: Partners in Institutional Change

One participant mentioned how discussion of the data has led to an increasing visibility for faculty developers as change agents. By working with new faculty and teaching assistants, faculty developers help to build the campus culture. Several campuses now use (or anticipate using) NSSE at orientation for new faculty and teaching assistants to help them to understand the student body, academic rigor, and modes of teaching and learning on campus. Several participants noted that in the past Centers for Teaching Excellence or Improvement had been viewed skeptically by faculty on certain campuses. Institution-wide conversations and uses of NSSE, however, have created a new respect for the mission of these centers. Many faculty developers are taking this opportunity to promote the long-time services they have provided like information and workshops about collaborative or active learning, student feedback, and observation of teaching. Others are including data in existing activities such as opening-year sessions with faculty or conferences on teaching and learning. One participant suggested, "how important it is to communicate to faculty how students feel about their learning experience."

- Some faculty developers are using NSSE data to develop new programs to change the campus culture:
  "I have found it important to bring together groups of faculty to talk about the survey items themselves, not the scores. What is the right number of papers to assign? How much memorization or synthesis should be emphasized in the learning process? I find these conversations most meaningful because then they are focused on the theories of learning that support the survey like the seven principles of good teaching and learning, not our particular results and pulling those apart. Essentially, we discuss and learn what student engagement is and how to be learner centered."
- Others have become part of new institutional efforts to improve teaching and learning based on NSSE results:
  "On our campus we passed out grade distributions by department to start a conversation about grade inflation. Many people came to the Center for Teaching Excellence to understand their department's data, so people became knowledgeable about the ways the Center can support teaching and learning in general."
- Still others have plans for new uses of the data:
  - Several participants mentioned disaggregating the data by race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation to be able to help faculty understand and meet the needs of different student populations. Some wanted to work with their institutional rsearch (IR) offices to obtain that kind of breakdown to support new faculty development initiatives that are sensitive to unique students' needs.
  - Others focused on ways that data can support institutional decision-making around teaching and learning. One participant noted, "I would like to use our low score for community service learning to demonstrate that the Center needs resources to provide faculty development in this area or to examine our high scores on diverse perspectives in the classroom and to celebrate this result on campus. We have the data and we should use it to support this kind of decision-making around teaching and learning initiatives." Another participant supported this comment saying that the Center for Teaching Excellence could examine the scores and come up with model policies and practices to address areas for which there are low scores, providing specific suggestions for faculty and administrators to follow.

- One unique use of data would be its utilization as part of a comprehensive assessment plan for the campus; the faculty developer is an integral part of this planning process.

These examples suggest that faculty developers are using NSSE data to support institutional efforts to create a new teaching and learning culture. Because this new culture involves the creation of a new language about student engagement, faculty developers are leading efforts to promote a new vocabulary. Administrators should be aware that they have a strong advocate and ally in this group. One faculty developer described this dedication in the following way: "I bring NSSE data to any forum I am at, no matter the topic – graduation, retention, learning communities – I make people aware of where we are at, so we can move toward improvement. Gentle persuasion, relentlessly applied." Because faculty developers support institutional efforts institution-wide planning. This is an issue that campuses should examine.

Interpreting NSSE Data for Faculty

The most strategic use of NSSE data has been in initiating conversations among faculty about institutional improvement. Every faculty developer agreed that the institutional research officers and upper level administrators were the main voices on campus related to NSSE because they are most likely to receive institutional reports. Since they have had a chance to absorb the data, they tend to understand ways it can be used on campus. However, faculty are the ones who must implement most of the implications of the survey results. With this recognition, a concerted effort to get NSSE results out to faculty has begun. Faculty developers can be key in the distribution of data if campuses include faculty developers as interpreters of NSSE data. Centers for Teaching Excellence need full copies of NSSE data directly and in a timely fashion.

On some campuses survey results are circulated to deans or department chairs with the request that they be shared with faculty. On rare occasions results are sent directly to individual faculty or to faculty developers. However, faculty are either resistant to statistics and have trouble finding meaning in the data or they are familiar with quantitative analysis and tend to question the validity of items on the survey while ignoring the overall results. Individual disciplinary differences (anthropologists versus physicists) further complicate translation.

Several suggestions were offered:

- Provide a copy of the survey to those who read reports the data so that they are able to put the results in context for faculty.
- Reformulate report data for individuals with no statistical background. The institutional research officer and faculty development professional are key persons in this translation. They could team with a few department chairs or deans.
- Form a campus-wide task force with students, faculty, the institutional research officer, and administrators who can examine the data. The outcome of their conversations can be released in a newsletter to the community. The collective review of data brings together different perspectives.
- Translate the data to the particular campus and context. Use peer comparisons when they are helpful.
- Collect or combine qualitative data from students that make the numerical data come to life for faculty. As one participant noted, "Sometimes the anecdotal information will make the data 'click' for a faculty member. We can play a role in obtaining this supportive data since we are often in contact with students." One participant mentioned using the student theater troupe as a way to translate results to faculty and staff. Another has students journal about their experiences on campus or conducting focus groups to provide stories about student life and engagement. Participants suggested pushing the boundaries to create meaning out of raw numbers.

Tracking faculty usage of NSSE data is important. One person suggested putting the results on an internet site that would automatically register information about the faculty member (department, rank, etc). This would provide rich data on who was reviewing and potentially using the information. Others suggested using follow-up surveys from faculty orientation to ask whether faculty were using NSSE data to change their approach to teaching. Faculty developers are creating processes to ensure that their work in interpreting NSSE data has an impact.

Closing Thought

Faculty developers had these closing thoughts regarding NSSE data. Interpreted NSSE data can be a context for non-defensive and and comfortable conversations about the teaching and learning environment. Many were hopeful that NSSE data, as objective, outside measurements from the student's perspective, would provide that opportunity. NSSE data continues to provide information that leads not to competition but increased student learning. Institutional diagnosis and improvement should not be lost in a chase to move up in rankings or to defend results. One participant noted, "We so often get caught up in competition around the numbers. Policymakers' encouragement of comparison has proven destructive." NSSE data are particularly important in keeping the focus on student learning. One message during this roundtable was loud and clear: faculty developers can be active change agents with student engagement, so they need data and recognition as partners with other relevant groups. As campuses use NSSE to inform strategic planning and coordinated campus improvement, faculty developers can make a major contribution.

Participants

- Laura Border, University of Colorado at Boulder
- Dakin Burdick, Indiana University Bloomington
- Leslie Cafarelli, The Collaboration for the Advancement of College Teaching and Learning
- Nancy Chism, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- Margaret Cohen, University of Missouri, St. Louis
- Constance Cook, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
- Peter Frederick, Wabash College
- Sally Kuhlenschmidt, Western Kentucky University
- Judith Miller, Worcester Polytechnic Institute
- Karin Sandell, Ohio University
- Nancy Simpson, Texas A & M University
- Todd Zakrajsek, Central Michigan University
- Dorothy Zinsmeister, University System of Georgia

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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National Survey of Student Engagement
The College Student Report

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